

# Conspiracy Mongering in Venezuela: The *Chavismo* Period (1998–2018)

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Hugo Chávez's rise to power in 1998 brought many changes to Venezuela's political culture. One transformation not frequently commented on is the constant formulation of conspiracy theories, both by *chavismo* supporters and by its opponents. This article discusses some of those conspiracy theories, relating to the deceased Venezuelan President's origins, his religious beliefs, the 2002 failed coup d'état, and Chávez's own death. It also addresses more recent conspiracy theories relating to Nicolás Maduro's birth, economic warfare, and drug smuggling operations. Venezuela is currently undergoing a major humanitarian crisis, and this article defends the view that, at least partially, conspiracy mongering has been a factor in Venezuela's collapse. As part of Venezuela's reconstruction, this article recommends that Venezuelan political forces need to reach a consensus and agree not to make ridiculous conspiratorial claims.

Keywords: *chavismo*, conspiracy theories, Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela.

Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* became a seminal work and a classic sociological study, because it dared to calculate the power of the belief in conspiracy theories, and its consequences for political life (Hofstadter, 2012). Although it is firmly established that the human mind has a strong teleological tendency and, therefore, it frequently detects patterns and agencies where there are actually none (Lewandowski, 2018), the phenomenon of conspiracy theories is relatively recent, only dating back to the late eighteenth century.

The French Revolution shocked the established *ancien régime* of Europe, and the old aristocracies and the clergy refused to believe that those social convulsions could happen purely on account of social discontent. Therefore, in a landmark book of conspiracy theorising, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, Augustin Barruel (1995) sought to expose the alleged hidden forces that were truly behind the French Revolution, i.e. secret societies such as the Illuminati.

Ever since then authors in the modern period have come up with multiple conspiracy theories, most of them having some relation to the political sphere. Yet few scholars seriously considered the great influence that these theories could have on everyday political life. Hofstadter changed that by documenting how, in American politics, the 'paranoid style' has increasingly become more mainstream.

Conspiracy theories are more likely to arise in the context of major social transformation and cultural anxieties (Knight, 2000: 184). Donald Trump's rise to

power in the US and the increase of conspiracy mongering in American society seem to confirm this. Yet it would be a mistake to think that conspiracy mongering is mostly an American phenomenon. In fact, it is rampant in the Middle East (Pipes, 1998) and Eastern Europe (Tapon, 2011: 362).

Latin America has not been traditionally a hotbed of conspiracy mongering, at least as compared to other more unstable regions. However, the deep social agitation brought about by the rise of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela beginning in 1998, and the subsequent establishment of *chavismo* as both a political movement and a political style, has made Venezuela a fertile ground for conspiracy mongering. Although conspiracy theories have always been present in Venezuela (and will likely continue in the years to come, even if there is regime change), the ascendancy of *chavismo* set a new precedent in conspiracy mongering.

In this article we will review some of the most prominent conspiracy theories promoted by *chavismo* and its opponents, how it has shaped Venezuelan political life, and how this paranoid style has had some deleterious effect in this South American country. As we discuss these conspiracy theories, we must not lose sight of an important point: Venezuela's humanitarian crisis is due to a wide array of causal factors (hyperinflation, corruption, mismanagement, etc.), most of which have little to do with conspiracy mongering. Yet conspiracy mongering is still an accessory phenomenon that must be analysed in order to have a clearer picture of Venezuelan affairs. No serious analyst would ever claim that Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* successfully explained every aspect of American political life in the 1950s, but we may still consider it a relevant contribution, inasmuch as it explored a frequently neglected phenomenon in American political culture. By the same token, the study of conspiracy mongering during the *chavismo* period in Venezuela should in no way eclipse more relevant explanations of Venezuela's collapse, but it should still invite further reflection about how constantly coming up with conspiracy theories has contributed to Venezuela's misfortunes.

Of course, not every conspiracy theory is false. Some do turn out to be true, and in the history of Latin America this has been particularly the case in some instances (e.g., regime change in Guatemala and Chile). But, as we shall see, the formulation of most conspiracy theories is deeply irrational and on the basis of no real evidence whatsoever, and that is sufficient to arouse scepticism.

## Chávez's Rise to Power

Hugo Chávez's rise to power was a watershed in Venezuelan history, and took many observers by surprise, but it certainly did not come out of a vacuum. In 1958, a massive coalition of civil society sectors, along with the armed forces, ousted dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez from power. Up to that moment, Venezuela had not had a real and lasting democracy. This time, however, there was a strong societal consensus and commitment to cement strong institutional bases for a working democracy, with guaranteed freedoms and power alterability.

For 40 years, this democratic period was characterised by free elections, peaceful transfers of power, an economic bonanza, and significant infrastructure projects. Yet Venezuelan democracy was far from perfect, and by 1989 it was showing clear signs of decay. An economic bonanza due to oil production was never complemented with fair distribution of wealth. Deep social and economic inequalities led to social strife in February 1989, and in the mist of brutal repression by the recently elected president

Carlos Andres Pérez, more than 200 people were murdered by security forces (Arraiz Lucca, 2007).

These events sent shockwaves through the population. A group of young military forces seized the opportunity to plan a military coup. Hugo Chávez was the leader of this group. In their narrative, the brutality of the 1989 repression was the prime motivation to prepare a military rebellion. But the evidence seems to point in another direction. According to Chávez's own testimony, as early as 1982 he had made a pledge under a Saman tree, to work towards the 'liberation' of Venezuela (Clark, 2009: 53).

For ten years, first in military barracks, and then in the wider Venezuelan civil society, he was secretly plotting to seize power. His social abilities helped him persuade many sympathisers to lend logistical support, while at the same time keeping it sufficiently quiet to avoid suspicion from the authorities. Chávez, thus, was no stranger to conspiracy. Perhaps his acquaintance with conspiring made it all too easy for him and his followers to project their conspiratorial mind-set onto the rest of the population, and develop their own paranoid style in politics. If he was fully aware that his own conspiracy eventually took him to power, then he would also imagine that his opponents would be engaged in conspiracies to overthrow him.

Chávez's military coup failed in 1992, and he was sent to prison. At the time, he was for the most part unknown by the Venezuelan people. As often happens, conspiracy rumours were formed around his persona. Nobody knew for sure who was supporting him. Was it the left? Was it the right? Did the US have anything to do with it? Did Cuba? Long-time leftist activist and university professor Agustín Blanco Muñoz has consistently claimed that, from the very beginning, Chávez was actually supported by the US Government in order to ensure oil supply. This conspiracy theory has no evidence whatsoever in its favour, but it is an example of the type of paranoid suspicions that the 1992 coup aroused.

In the ensuing months, as it became clear that Chávez had conspired with no help from foreign agents, he began to gain enormous popularity. While in prison he received many visits from disgruntled Venezuelans who hoped for social and political change. Finally, the building social pressure forced President Rafael Caldera to acquit Chávez, and release him from prison in 1994. This was typical of Caldera's political style. In the 1970s, Caldera had gained reputation as a great pacifier, by declaring an amnesty for guerrilla fighters. Throughout his political career, he aspired to form an image as a consensus builder. Logically enough, at a time of great social unrest, Caldera calculated that releasing Chávez from prison would help build a social consensus in Venezuela.

At the time, very few people objected. Yet when Chávez reached the presidency and political polarisation was dramatically increased, a large proportion of his opponents came up with the narrative that, ultimately, Caldera was to blame for his unwise decision. And, as a complement of this narrative, a new conspiracy theory was formed: Caldera and Chávez were relatives. Chávez's father, Hugo de los Reyes, was a schoolteacher, and a militant of *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*, (COPEI, Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee), a centre-right Christian party. Caldera, in turn, was the founder of COPEI. After Chávez's rise to power, conspiracy theorists started claiming that, in fact, because of political manoeuvrings, Caldera had accepted Hugo de los Reyes' invitation to be godfather at Chávez's baptism. In this narrative, his middle name, Rafael, was in honour of Caldera. Following the strong Catholic tradition of *compadrazgo* (godfatherhood), Caldera was allegedly compelled to indult his own godson.

As it has been extensively researched by psychologists, conspiracy theorists work by connecting dots that, in reality, are disconnected (Brotherton, 2017: 175). The political affiliation of Chávez's father, and Chávez's own middle name, were enough for the conspiracy theorist to build this narrative of nepotism. Of course, these are completely undocumented rumours. But they set the tone for the conspiracy mongering that would follow in the ensuing years.

Once released from prison, Chávez would work on his candidacy to the presidency of Venezuela, finally being elected in 1998. He capitalised on Venezuelans' resentment against the ruling elite. In a country with rampant corruption and severe inequalities, many of his claims and arguments were no doubt legitimate. Yet in recounting the history of Venezuela's democratic period up until that time, Chávez added his own elements of conspiratorial thinking.

One common trope of conspiracy theorists is that secret cabals get together behind closed doors to call the shots of world affairs. The Bilderberg Group, the Club of Rome, the Illuminati, or whatever other secret and not-so-secret elite organisations, conspire to form a New World Order, by massively excluding the rest of the world population. Chávez claimed something similar in the case of Venezuela. In his narrative, upon the ousting of dictator Pérez Jiménez, Venezuela's new ruling elite assembled in Rafael Caldera's residence, Punto Fijo in Caracas (Lopez Maya, 1986). There they formed a pact that would only allow members of their cabal to achieve positions of power. Ever since, so Chávez's argument went, this cabal had ruled Venezuela, to the exclusion of hard-working and honest Venezuelans. He described his political mission as undoing the Punto Fijo pact (Anselmi, 2013).

Such gathering indisputably took place in Punto Fijo. Yet Chávez's conspiratorial version of the story is not entirely accurate. The purpose of the Punto Fijo gathering was simply to set guidelines in order to make a commitment to the emerging democracy. Representatives from all sectors of civil society were invited to the gathering. The Communist Party refused to attend, in the belief that a bourgeois democracy was being formed in Venezuela. Eventually, other left-wing parties (such as the Unión Republicana Democrática [URD, Democratic Republic Union]) abandoned the coalition (Fleischman, 2013: 5). The crucial point, however, is that those parties willingly walked out of the pact; they were *not* excluded or expelled. Yet Chávez's political ascendancy was built upon the narrative that the Punto Fijo pact was in fact a conspiracy, and throughout his period in power, he continuously claimed that very much as they had done in 1958, the old ruling elite would assemble behind closed doors, in order to impose their tyranny on ordinary Venezuelans.

## The 2002 Attempted Coup d'état and Beyond

A turning point in the development of the paranoid style in Venezuelan politics was the series of events that happened between 11 and 13 April 2002. Venezuela has been no stranger to military coups. In fact, the latter half of the nineteenth century was a long succession of *caudillos* (warlords) overthrowing other *caudillos* from power. But the way Chávez was removed from power on 11 April 2002, and then astonishingly returned on 13 April, was extremely confusing. Predictably, it set the tone for an increase in conspiratorial thinking, both amongst Chávez's supporters and his opponents.

The leadership of Venezuela's national oil company Petróleos de Venezuela, Sociedad Anónima (PDVSA, Petroleum of Venezuela, Anonymous Society), was unhappy with

Chávez's increasing control of the industry and the appointment of outsiders as new managers. In the name of meritocracy, a national strike was called in the early days of April, 2002. With the support of private media outlets, social pressure built up. On 11 April, a massive popular demonstration changed direction towards the Presidential Palace. Along the way, snipers from surrounding buildings shot demonstrators, killing eleven, and the massive crowd dispersed.

It has never been clarified under whose orders those snipers worked. According to the version of Chávez's opponents, these snipers were part of 'Plan Avila', a contingency military plan for the repression of civil disobedience, directly ordered by Chávez (Delgado, 2015). General Manuel Rosendo refused to go along with the murderous plan, and informed other high-ranking military officials of Chávez's actions. They then decided to arrest Chávez and, after accepting his resignation, drove him into exile.

According to the official version promoted by Chávez's government, he never resigned. He was forcibly arrested by generals who, in advance, had already planned his removal from power. The snipers operated under the orders of the conspirators; the whole purpose was to shoot demonstrators in order to make people think that Chávez was savagely repressing the demonstration and was thus justifiably removed from power (Villegas, 2009).

One day after his removal from power, Chávez's supporters also went on demonstrations demanding his return. These demonstrations became large enough to force the remaining conspirators to bring back Chávez from exile the next day and resume his presidential office. The identity of the snipers has never been clarified, but there does seem to be evidence in favour of the hypothesis that the US had some participation in the failed coup (Vulliamy, 2002). Amongst Chávez's supporters this prompted the conspiracy theory that, indeed, those snipers were in league with opposition forces and the US Government, and that, as had been done with Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz and Chile's Salvador Allende, the CIA had Chávez on its target list of Latin American presidents to be removed from power.

Chávez's opponents, on the other hand, attributed little importance to American participation in the events. They paid much more attention to the strange fact that a general apparently loyal to Chávez, Lucas Rincón, publicly announced that Chávez had indeed resigned. When he returned to power, he embarked on massive retaliations to many of the conspirators, driving most of them into exile. However, he was very lenient with Rincón, appointing him ambassador to Portugal.

How can this strange fact be explained? As might be expected, this aroused new conspiracy theories. It was soon claimed that perhaps Rincón knew an uncomfortable secret about Chávez's behaviour during those days, and Chávez's leniency was just a hush tactic. In a more extreme form of this conspiracy theory, it was claimed that the whole affair was actually a coup orchestrated by Chávez, in order to test the loyalty of his generals, and cleanse those who proved not to be loyal (Frontado, 2002).

Be that as it may, the truth is that, indeed, he seized the opportunity to carry out massive purges in the Armed Forces and, most notably, in public administration. Some months after the failed coup, Venezuela's oil industry went on strike once again. Chávez retaliated by firing at least half of the total employee force and, additionally, strengthened his grip on public administration by requiring public employees at all levels to declare their loyalty to Chávez and his ideology. Those who opposed, were fired.

This led to an increasing sense of paranoia and conspiracy mongering in public administration, and all industries controlled by the government. Chávez began an aggressive programme of expropriation of many industries. And every time a company

was nationalised, new managers, politically appointed, would warn employees to be wary of sabotage operations. Employees were exhorted to denounce as an infiltrator any co-worker who was suspected of not being ideologically in tune with the government.

One of his collaborators, deputy Luis Tascón, came up with a massive list of Venezuelans suspected of not sympathising with the government (Handlin, 2017: 150). These citizens were denied any employment opportunities in the public sector, and were also excluded from the social welfare programmes that Chávez began promoting in the years following the failed coup. Again, the rationale was that those Venezuelans included on the list posed a danger to national security, because they may have had participation in the failed coup, and could be in league with foreign agents, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

By this time, Chávez had become much closer to Fidel Castro. As part of a series of bilateral agreements, Venezuela would provide free oil to Cuba and, in exchange, Cuba would send trained medical doctors to offer healthcare services in Venezuela's impoverished neighbourhoods. Opposition forces did not take these decisions lightly. They objected that in monetary terms, Venezuela was providing far more than it was receiving. This is beyond doubt. However, it was also claimed that in its medical missions, Cuba was sending much more than just doctors. Allegedly, Cuba was infiltrating security agents amongst the general population, as part of operations for civil control, and training of irregular forces in order to attack and weaken political organisations opposed to Chávez (Vinografoff, 2010). This conspiracy theory has never been entirely proven, although there are some indications that, indeed, Cuban influence in key areas of public administration in Venezuela has been established.

With this climate of paranoia, in 2004 another event aroused conspiracy mongering on an even higher level, on both sides of the Venezuelan political spectrum. Public Attorney Danilo Anderson, who had been in charge of prosecuting participants in the 2002 failed coup, was assassinated by a car bomb. The apparent material authors of this crime were arrested, and the official investigation pointed to Colombia's right-wing paramilitary groups, and some high-profile opposition figures, most notably journalist Patricia Poleo, who fled into exile. According to the official version, Poleo was part of a conspiracy to murder Anderson, given that the Attorney was getting close to discovering who had orchestrated the 2002 failed coup (Allard, 2005).

Opposition forces, however, came up with a different version. As recounted by Pablo Medina, the greatest enthusiast for this conspiracy theory, Anderson was the head of an extortion ring, under the command of José Vicente Rangel, a prominent political figure on the revolutionary left, who had always been loyal to Chávez (Medina, 2005). Allegedly, Anderson was bypassing Rangel in his extortion operations, not paying the commissions originally agreed upon, and Rangel ordered his murder. Again, the evidence for these allegations is slim.

Venezuelan media had become increasingly critical of Chávez's governments, and he was bound to show his autocratic colours by increasing control over media. Yet the increasing proliferation of conspiracy theories in the opposition also seemed to be a motivation. Greater control over the media would allow the government to discredit conspiracy theories promoted by the opposition, and promote its own conspiracy theories. RCTV, a TV channel with a hard editorial line against the government, was closed down. The state-controlled media became more aggressive in their conspiracy claims, alleging that most of the opposition leaders were CIA agents, and airing documentaries defending the hypothesis that 9/11 was an inside job.



As part of this communication strategy, Mario Silva, a political commentator and television broadcaster, gained massive popularity with his show on state-media television. His communications approach can be to a large degree compared to Alex Jones's conspiratorial style. Silva would speak very naturally to ordinary people and, in the process, he would promote all sorts of conspiracy theories. He constantly warned about subliminal messages broadcast on the few remaining private media networks (a much discredited conspiracy theory) (Gulyas, 2016: 108); he claimed there were in Venezuela secret organisations of white supremacists (something completely alien to Venezuelan history) setting out to impose a Nazi-like regime; he denounced as CIA agents most of the opposition leaders; and, most importantly, he continually warned about the imminent danger of right-wing sympathisers in Venezuelan public administration and even within the ranks of *chavismo*.

## **Bolívar's Death and Chávez's Death**

In the years after the failed coup, Chávez repeatedly alleged that there were multiple plots to assassinate him. He did not seem to be personally paranoid about this prospect. In fact, his security proved to be lax, as numerous times ordinary people would manage to get close to him. It seemed more that he was just being cynical, and understood that claiming to be the target of assassination plots legitimised his increasing grip on power.

Ever since his time as a presidential candidate, it appears that Chávez felt a mystical connection with Simón Bolívar. Throughout his political career, Chávez used Bolívar as a powerful symbol, frequently positioning himself as a second Bolívar. This would also be the case with his claims about assassination plots, projecting onto Bolívar his own anxieties. It has been firmly established by historians that Bolívar died in 1830 of natural causes (either tuberculosis or syphilis). Yet in 2007, Chávez came up with a new conspiracy theory: Bolívar was actually murdered, perhaps with the participation of the US Government (Narvaja, 2008). It is a historical fact that Bolívar survived two assassination attempts, and that by 1830, Bolívar did not have a very high opinion of the US (although he had great esteem for American institutions throughout his lifetime). However, the evidence uncontestedly points to death by natural causes.

He insisted that Bolívar was poisoned with arsenic, and in order to prove it, he ordered the exhumation of Bolívar's corpse, in order to carry out an investigation. A team of forensic specialists opened up Bolívar's tomb on 16 July 2010. Chávez himself was present to pay his respects to the national hero. The forensic team never came up with conclusive evidence that Bolívar was murdered. But Bolívar's exhumation in turn led to new conspiracy theories, this time coming from Chávez's opponents.

Let us recall that conspiratorial thinking, very much like pareidolia, relies on detecting patterns where, in fact, there are none. After Tutankhamun's tomb was opened in 1922, some of the members of that archaeological expedition suffered untimely deaths, and it was soon popularly believed that those deaths were actually because of a curse coming from the pharaoh himself, due to his tomb being disturbed. Of course, more thorough scientific analyses of those deaths revealed that there was actually no pattern, and that the deaths were not related (Van Hecke, 2007: 178).

Within a few months of Bolívar's tomb being opened, prominent figures of *chavismo* had untimely deaths: Luis Tascón, Alberto Muller Rojas, William Lara, Clodosvaldo Russián, and Lina Ron. This pattern elicited a new conspiracy theory: all these persons had planned the opening of Bolívar's tomb, as part of an occult ritual related to Santería. The purpose would be to transfer Bolívar's mystical powers to Hugo Chávez himself

and thus ensure his indefinite grip on Venezuela's government. Allegedly, the fact that the exhumation began at midnight proved the occult connection (Placer, 2016).

When, in 2011, Chávez publicly announced that he was diagnosed with cancer, many of his opponents believed that, alas, Chávez could not have escaped the Bolivarian curse. Psychologists have extensively documented the strong correlation between confirmation bias and proneness to believe conspiracy theories (Buckley, 2018). Indeed, it became all too easy for some Venezuelans to confirm their initial belief that opening Bolívar's tomb would curse Chávez, neglecting the fact that many others who worked on the exhumation (including the forensic team) are alive and well.

Predictably, in a climate of extreme paranoia and conspiracy mongering, natural misfortunes are never accepted as such. In a classic ethnographic description, Evans-Pritchard documents how the Azande attribute all unfortunate phenomena to witchcraft, even if their origin is clearly accidental (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). In the same way, Chávez refused to believe that his cancer came about naturally, perhaps as a result of his own unhealthy habits (smoking, lack of sleep). He thus came up with yet another conspiracy theory: the US Government had somehow inoculated him with cancer (Phillips, 2011). Again, as often happens with conspiracy theories, he relied on false pattern detection: inasmuch as other leftist Latin American politicians were diagnosed with cancer at the same time (Brazil's Lula and Paraguay's Lugo), he refused to believe it could have been a coincidence.

The conspiracy claim was on and off for almost two years, until Chávez's death in 2013. But even when Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, addressed the nation announcing that the President had died, he repeated the claim that Chávez had been murdered via cancer inoculation.

In turn, opposition forces came up with their own conspiracy theory regarding Chávez's death. In December 2012, Chávez gave a final speech to the nation, announcing that he would travel to Cuba for treatment, and designating Nicolás Maduro as his successor, should he die soon. After two months of treatment, Chávez returned to Venezuela, this time in severe pain, unconscious for most of the time, and unable to address the nation. He finally died on 5 March 2013, in a Caracas hospital. His body was embalmed, and laid to rest in a monument, after a state funeral, during which his body was exhibited to massive crowds.

However, opposition spokespeople claim that Chávez actually died in Cuba in January 2013, and that his death was kept hidden from the Venezuelan people, in order to give enough time to prepare a smooth transition. His body was never taken to Venezuela. The body exhibited during the funeral was in fact a wax dummy. Needless to say, this conspiracy theory lacks entirely any empirical support, and very much as with any other conspiracy of massive deception (such as, say, the fake lunar landing) it would involve huge numbers of participants; eventually, some insider would come out and reveal the truth. So far, the only insider to support this conspiracy theory has been former Chief Public Attorney Luisa Ortega Díaz, who now claims that on 28 December 2012 she was informed by Diosdado Cabello (a prominent figure in *chavismo*) that Chávez had died. However, the fact that Ortega is now exiled and out of favour with the government removes any credibility from her story.

## Birtherism, Economic Warfare, and *Los Soles* (The Suns) Cartel

In 2013, Chávez was succeeded in the presidency by one of his most loyal collaborators, Nicolás Maduro, a former bus driver from Caracas. Maduro was the son of



Colombian immigrants. Historically, Venezuela's relationship with Colombia has been complex. Venezuela was originally part of the Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada, whose capital was Bogotá. In 1777, Venezuela was reorganised as a General Captaincy, no longer being part of Nueva Granada. Once the Spanish troops were forced out of Nueva Granada, Ecuador and Venezuela in the 1820s, Simón Bolívar united all three regions under his command, and formed the country of Colombia.

However, this country would be short-lived. The ruling elites tried to bring together three territories that were poorly connected by roads, and had their own different sense of cultural and historical identity. By 1830 had the country collapsed, and Ecuador and Venezuela seceded. That was a painful process, as there were territorial disputes. Ever since, despite their cultural proximity, Venezuelan and Colombian governments have occasionally expressed mutual contempt, and this animosity has also occasionally been converted into xenophobia amongst ordinary people.

Thus, when Nicolás Maduro was elected president in 2013, he aroused some xenophobic suspicions amongst opponents of *chavismo*, because of his Colombian ancestry. Conspiracy theorists claimed that Maduro had actually been born in Cúcuta, has a Colombian birth certificate, and, therefore, cannot be legally President of Venezuela.

Although few (if any) conspiracy theorists acknowledge it, this particular allegation takes much inspiration from the birther movement in the US. In 2008, a series of conspiracy theorists (including President Donald Trump) expressed doubts that Barack Obama had been born in the US, and demanded proof of his birth certificate. Whenever this document was presented, conspiracy theorists countered that it was a forgery. Five years later, the same pattern was repeated in Venezuela: Maduro's birth certificate would be presented to the nation, but conspiracy theorists would be sceptical about its authenticity. Very much as in the birther movement in the US, cultural anxiety and xenophobia seemed to play a major role in the formation of this conspiracy theory.

However, unlike conspiracy theories about Obama's birth, conspiracy theories about Maduro's birth have not disappeared so easily, in part because Maduro is far more unpopular than Obama in their respective countries. Lacking Chávez's charisma (which contributed largely to his success as a politician), Maduro has proven to be a very ineffective leader, and due to a drop in oil prices, but also due to disastrous management, Venezuela's economy collapsed in 2013. The results have been massive shortages and an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Maduro's government has been in denial for the most part. But given the overwhelming weight of the evidence, it has decided it can no longer hide the severe crisis. However, as expected in a country with constant conspiracy mongering, Maduro's government has very rarely acknowledged any fault, and prefers to come up with its own conspiracy theories about the reasons for Venezuela's collapse.

The official version, constantly communicated by Maduro, government officials, and state media, is that there is an international plot of economic warfare against Venezuela, and this is the cause of Venezuela's troubles (Nelson, 2017). They frequently mention that this has happened before; they point to the CIA's plans of economic warfare in Chile, and how it eventually brought down Salvador Allende's government.

This requires some clarification. It is absolutely beyond doubt that the CIA orchestrated the 1973 coup that removed Allende from power. And it is also true that the CIA had plans for economic warfare in Chile. But there is no evidence that those plans

were actually carried out in Chile. While there is enough evidence that the CIA was the main culprit in the coup, there is also enough evidence to prove that Chile's economic troubles came about as a result of Allende's mismanagement of the economy (Cardoso and Helwege, 2007).

At any rate, very much like theorists who talk about an international conspiracy to bring about a New World Order ruled by the Illuminati, Masons, Reptilians (or whatever other real or imagined group), Maduro's conspiracy theory never gives details about exactly how, where, when, and by whom this economic warfare is planned and executed. As documented by psychologists, conspiracy theorists tend to avoid precision in their claims, and are content with just making vague claims that match their preconceived ideas (Lenman and Cinnirella, 2013). Maduro's conspiracy theories about economic warfare fit this pattern.

Maduro's presidency has been a colossal failure. However, instead of targeting their criticism on his numerous flaws, some sector of opponents to *chavismo* go further, and have come up with yet another conspiracy theory. To do so, they rely (as conspiracy mongers often do) once again on the notion of pure evil. In their account, Maduro is not just incompetent, he is actually a drug lord who runs major drug traffic operations.

It is indisputably true that two of Maduro's nephews have been sentenced to prison on drug-related charges, by a criminal court in the US (Pierson, 2017). But the conspiracy theory goes far beyond this fact. On the basis of the testimony of a single informant, Walid Maakled, conspiracy theorists claim that there exists in Venezuela an organisation called 'Los Soles' cartel, directed by the top elite of the Venezuelan Armed Forces, with strongman Diosdado Cabello as its head. Allegedly, this cartel uses military infrastructure to smuggle drugs into the United States and Europe.

It is not completely unheard of that Latin American governments, especially those with leftist ideologies, have been suspected of participating in drug smuggling operations. In the late 1980s, for example, there was a massive purge in the Cuban Armed Forces, with military personnel (most notably General Reinaldo Ochoa) being sentenced on drug smuggling charges. Many analysts believe that Fidel Castro himself was part of these operations, but as he felt that the DEA was getting close to revealing his participation in these activities, he decided to scapegoat Ochoa.

Likewise, leftist Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas in Colombia have long acknowledged their alliances with drug traffickers (with the excuse that they just collect a 'revolutionary tax' from them). For many years, Chávez explicitly sympathised with FARC guerrillas, and there was a strong suspicion that the Venezuelan government provided extensive logistical support to these irregular combatants.

It is therefore not altogether implausible that the Venezuelan Government may indeed participate in drug smuggling operations. However, these hypotheses are presented in a framework of typical conspiracy mongering. The claims about the existence of 'Los Soles' cartel rely solely on the basis of the testimony of one single witness (Maakled), who, admittedly, had some connections with government officials, but for the most part remains unreliable. For now, the ontological status of 'Los Soles' cartel remains more similar to that of semi-mythical secret societies (the Templars, the Rosicrucians, the Priory of Sion) than real criminal organisations such as Camorra, Medellín Cartel, Latin Kings or the Crips.

## Conclusion

Conspiracy theories undoubtedly have a popular appeal, because they satisfy the mind's curiosity for agency and pattern detection and, most importantly, are immensely entertaining as narratives. Yet they are far from being harmless fun. As Umberto Eco relates in his great novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, being immersed in a world of imagined conspiracies can alter a person's mental health, and lead to tragic consequences.

The harm is not only psychological. It is also sociological. Conspiracy mongering erodes the public trust that is needed in any functional democracy. The paranoid style is strongly related to populist movements that, ultimately, do not provide satisfactory solutions to social problems, and instead instigate confrontations and civil strife.

Over the last twenty years, Venezuela has seen a dramatic increase in the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and the results have been very negative. By appealing to conspiracy theories about Chávez's origins and his relations to occultism, opponents of *chavismo* failed to understand that Venezuelan democracy before Chávez was not working adequately, and did not bother to take the necessary corrective measures.

On the other hand, Chávez's personality lent itself to the constant promotion of conspiracy theories, and by doing so, he stimulated an environment of political paranoia and anti-intellectualism that resulted in massive political discrimination and civil strife. Likewise, Chávez's successor, Maduro, has continued the conspiracy mongering game by constantly blaming imagined foreign agents for his own failures, thus refusing to correct his own mismanagement of the economy. In turn, Maduro's opponents have failed to adequately criticise his many failures, and instead have chosen to concentrate on conspiracy theories regarding his birth and his alleged activities as a drug lord.

After being a prosperous country with relatively strong institutions, Venezuela is now undergoing a humanitarian crisis. It would be too simplistic to argue that the sole culprit of this catastrophe is the unbounded formulation of conspiracy theories, but it is certainly a factor that must be considered. If anything, conspiracy theories are the effect (rather than the cause) of much more troubling phenomena going on for two decades in Venezuela: disastrous economic policies, wearing down of institutions, cracking down of civil liberties, etc. These main causes have been (and continue to be) thoroughly analysed by many authors, and we cannot emphasise enough that they are the real reason for Venezuela's collapse. Yet the analysis of conspiracy mongering also sheds light on the unfortunate state of political culture in Venezuela, and although by no means as central as the other causal factors of the humanitarian crisis, it is still a phenomenon that analysts should not neglect.

By the same token, the reconstruction of Venezuela will require a huge civic effort that entails major changes in economic and social policies. But a small, yet still important, aspect of this reconstruction will also be a national consensus in which both parties, *chavismo* and its opponents, agree not to make ridiculous conspiratorial claims, and recover a healthier intellectual approach to the solution of many of Venezuela's problems.

In fact, as political analysts have demonstrated in other countries, we now know that conspiracy theories have real effects in concrete aspects of political life. And if Venezuela's rampant conspiracy mongering continues in the years to come, meaningful reconstruction policies (economic reforms, refashioning of institutions, etc.) will not be as effective, because ordinary Venezuelans will remain suspicious of them. As Richard

Weaver famously claimed, ideas have consequences (Weaver, 1948). Even if conspiracy theories by themselves do not suffice to explain Venezuela's troubles in the last two decades, they do have tangible impacts.

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